

(U) "Ask Zelda!": Phone Hog Grills Callers, Spills Beans

FROM: "Zelda," Dispenser of Advice on Workplace Issues

Run Date: 09/07/2012

[Note: the question has been edited for space considerations.]

Dear Zelda,



(U) This question concerns phone etiquette in the office. While our management has designated one individual to answer all incoming non-secure phone calls, that person can't always perform the task because another co-worker seems to be in a race to beat her to it. Phone phreak always asks who is calling after the caller asks for "so and so." This person is not the office secretary, nor my personal secretary, nor the designated "phone call screener." I do not want a co-worker asking callers who they are (it is often personal and private -- a doctor, an attorney, etc.) nor to tell the unidentified caller where the person being called is and what they are doing (such as, "she stepped out to lunch about 2 hours ago"). While I

have expressed my concern to my supervisor, nothing has changed. I've even brought this up with phone phreak, but the grilling of callers continues.

(U) Are there any established phone etiquette rules that we can share with phone phreaks who ask too many questions of callers when they have no need to know and it is not their job?

Signed, Phrusterated by Phone Phreak

Dear Phrusterated,

(U//FOUO) I don't know about your phone phreak, but I was hired during the era when we were taught to answer the telephone with just the last four digits of the phone number. My insurance agent used to joke that my name was "3-2-4-2" and even called me that in person. We were given specific instruction to NOT reveal anything about the person who was being called. (If they were on leave you were not allowed to say so, just that they weren't available.) And if they had moved to another office, you were not allowed to give out the new phone number.

(U//FOUO) There is an **NSA policy*** that deals with how to answer the non-secure phone. It basically reiterates what I said above. Your management should review this policy with the office employees, stressing security practices. Here are my guidelines for "black phone" etiquette:

1. Answer the telephone by stating the phone number, so the caller can verify what number she has reached. You can add, "Zelda speaking, may I help you?" after that.** Note: anyone answering the phone should **not** be in the vicinity of classified conversation when picking up the non-secure line. This is why it's often best that the office manager, sitting apart from the technical work area, be the one to field outside calls. If there is classified work going on around you, it's wise to say "Phone's up!" before answering, to alert others in the area of a non-secure call.

2. When the caller tells you for whom she's calling, say "Just a moment, please" and put her on hold while you get the employee. If the employee is not at his desk, tell the caller, "Jerry is not available. Would you like to leave a message?" If the caller volunteers the information ("Yes, I'm Jerry's podiatrist. Tell him the lab test came back positive for toenail fungus.") that's one thing; but don't try to pry personal information out of her ("Are you his lawyer? How is that nasty divorce going,

anyway?"). Any legit professional will not reveal patient/client-privileged information to an unauthorized recipient.

3. If the employee no longer works there, you can

A) suggest the caller try him at an alternate number if she has a home or cell phone number for the employee -- but do not give one out;

B) volunteer to take down the caller's information and get a message to the employee -- and then email him or call him on the secure line to deliver the message; or

C) if the person has been gone from the office a long time, say there is no one by that name currently at this number.

4. Do not volunteer information about the employee unless you personally know the person on the other end of the line and that it's OK with the employee to do so.

(U) As for your nosy co-worker, I'm sure she's just trying to be helpful. Perhaps her job was answering the phone in a past position and it's a reflex. I hope, for the sake of your sanity, that your management agrees to implement something like the above guidelines, since your appeals to the phreak have not resulted in less grilling of the callers. It's not just a privacy preference, it's a security issue. If all else fails, here's one last sneaky resort: turn the ringer on her phone off. ☺

(U//FOUO) For the last several years, all the offices I've worked in (at NSAW) have had private lines for each employee. Perhaps this is coming soon to your organization?***

-Zelda

(U) Notes:

* (U//FOUO) See sections 15 - 18 on page 4 (Procedures). Contractors should consult item 6 on page 3 of **Policy 6-4**.

** (U//FOUO) First name only is fine for civilians, but the policy says military must use their rank and contractors must identify themselves as such.

*** (U//FOUO) A note to "Phrusterated by Phone Phreak": Please contact the SIGINT Interface for Mission Infrastructure for further info on that question. They can be reached at "DL SMI_IT."

(U) Standard disclaimer: Zelda's views are her own and do not represent the official views of the Associate Directorate for Corporate Leadership, Human Resources, SID, or any other NSA organization.

(U) Looking for some of the older "Ask Zelda" columns? They are filed away in the archives under the **"Ask Zelda! 2010"** and **"Ask Zelda! 2011"** series. Also, if you'd like to submit a question of your own to Zelda, just use the "comments/suggestions about this article" button below to send it in.
